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Source: *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (Summer 2011), pp. 287-297
Published by: Penn State University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/pennhistory.78.3.0287
Accessed: 10-03-2017 14:26 UTC

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WRITING PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY—A "LABOR OF TRUE ENJOYMENT": AN INTERVIEW WITH KEN AND BOB WOLENSKY

It is impossible to research the history of Pennsylvania—particularly its labor, industrial, and political history, and especially its Northeast history—without coming across seminal works by historians Ken and Bob Wolensky, two brothers for whom history has been a life-long labor of love. Here Ken and Bob offer their responses to questions posed by the editors of *Pennsylvania History* about their own interests, the uses of oral history, Northeast Pennsylvania (NEPA), and the future of the discipline.

EDITORS: *When did you become interested in writing about Pennsylvania's history and what sparked that interest?*

KEN: My interest in Pennsylvania history goes back to childhood as well as high school and college experiences.

Among my early memories is a Cub Scout trip to Valley Forge. I must have been about eight or nine years old. For me it was fascinating to visit such a place and to realize what had happened there—right in our own backyard. The interest in history

PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY: A JOURNAL OF MID-ATLANTIC STUDIES, VOL. 78, NO. 3, 2011.
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was further stimulated by a few excellent high school history teachers. One taught an elective Pennsylvania history course that really captured my attention. I wrote a paper in that class on the Wyoming Massacre.

As an undergraduate, I majored in history and realized that one day I wanted to write and teach about people, places, and events in state history. For one course I wrote a paper and gave a talk about several topics in Pennsylvania's history. I can't remember all of the topics but I know one was about the significance of the anthracite mining industry. Most people in the class had no idea what anthracite was or why it was significant. It was a real teaching opportunity! I worked diligently in all of those history classes, enjoyed each one, and graduated with honors.

I came to the practice of history in a circuitous way. After completing a graduate degree in public administration and working in several state government positions for eleven years, I went on to complete a doctorate at Penn State and then came to PHMC in 1997. Working at PHMC and being professionally involved in the Pennsylvania Historical Association has afforded me the opportunity to engage with state history, write and speak extensively about it, and interact with other public and academic historians.

History has been a labor of true enjoyment, really—one that started as a child. To me, the enjoyment of history has come naturally.

BOB: History was always a favorite subject in grade school, high school, and college but it turned into a life's work when [the] Tropical Storm Agnes disaster hit Pennsylvania and other states in June 1972. As a doctoral student at Penn State looking for a dissertation topic, I selected the Wyoming Valley/Wilkes-Barre area's efforts to deal with the catastrophe. The subject required that I delve not only into earlier flood disasters, but—as I quickly learned—the political and economic history of the community and the state. The National Science Foundation funded a follow-up study in 1982 that furthered my interest in the area's and the state's history.

The Wyoming Valley Oral History Project (WVOHP) grew out of the Agnes research and soon expanded to include coal mining, garment working, ethnicity, politics, economics, sports, and other topics. Over the past ten years or so Ken and I, along with my daughter, Nicole, have drawn upon the WVOHP in writing a few books about the northeastern region's mining and garment industries (listed below). I have coauthored other anthracite-region studies with colleagues and, in each case, we have called upon the oral histories.

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EDITORS: *What changes have you observed over time in the way historians approach the history of the Commonwealth?*

KEN: One of the major changes has been a growing body of scholarship on twentieth-century history. Several new books, as well as articles in *Pennsylvania History, Pennsylvania Heritage*, *Legacies* (Historical Society of Pennsylvania), and other publications, have dealt with twentieth century topics.

We've both thought that, perhaps, twentieth- and twenty-first century history are seen by some historians as too new—or almost current events—to be considered historically relevant. Yet, it is evident that twentieth-century history has been increasingly embraced by Pennsylvania historians. One need only look at a program for the Pennsylvania Historical Association's annual conference or at recent publications to see this change. More remains to be done, however.

Another change has been the exploration of environmental, labor, ethnic, women's, and black history. Pennsylvania is ripe with these histories and the reality is that they have just begun to be explored. Much more remains to be done here, too.

One of the challenges evident in Pennsylvania history is the changing approach to regionalism. That is, the Commonwealth has often been viewed by historians as a collection of regions rather than as a unified state. In recent years this notion has been confronted by new scholarship such as *Pennsylvania: A History of the Commonwealth* published jointly by Penn State Press and the PHMC in 2002. In addition to interpreting Pennsylvania history in a more unified manner, this important work provides insights into various ways of exploring state history such as through archival and photographic collections and oral histories. Through such publications, historians have begun to view Pennsylvania as a sum of the parts rather than a mere collection of separate areas.

Finally, in discussing major changes it is impossible to ignore the impact of the Internet. It is remarkable how, in the last ten years, an abundance of new websites on US and Pennsylvania history has made instantaneous information available on almost any topic. Web content seems to grow every day. Pennsylvania-based websites, such as ExplorePAhistory.com, are valuable tools that provide vital information. Historians and, especially, students, are wise to be careful, however. Sites such as Wikipedia may not be the best substitutes for doing research the old-fashioned way using primary and secondary sources. It is important to maintain balance in using the Internet.

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BOB: I would add the ever-growing interest in industrial and labor history. Certainly, Pennsylvania has an important preindustrial history, but in recent decades the industrial horizon has been greatly expanded and ever-more appreciated. The growing scholarship on the Northeastern and Pittsburgh regions, for example, reflects the trend. Bookstores are bursting with books and pamphlets by professionals and nonprofessionals alike.

Moreover, in the anthracite region alone there are now at least three regular conferences devoted in part or whole to industrial topics—the Annual Symposium of the National Canal Museum in Easton (Lance Metz, coordinator), the Luzerne County Community College's History of Wyoming Valley Conference in Nanticoke (Bill Kashatus, coordinator), and the Anthracite Heritage Conference at the Anthracite Heritage Museum in Scranton (Chester Kulesa, coordinator). The work of the Pennsylvania Labor History Society, the Battle of Homestead Foundation, as well as canal, industrial archeology, railroad, and related associations have added to the public's awareness and knowledge of the Commonwealth's rich industrial past.

EDITORS: *What are the current trends and opportunities for new scholarship on Pennsylvania history? What comes next in writing the story of the Commonwealth . . . is Mid-Atlantic history a new path for examining Pennsylvania history?*

KEN AND BOB: There are several trends in Pennsylvania history scholarship as evidenced by articles in *Pennsylvania History* and other journals, presentations at Pennsylvania Historical Association conferences as well as new books, exhibits, and websites. Chief among them is, simply, the newly emerging scholarship on Pennsylvania as well as the Mid-Atlantic region. Recent book, website, and exhibit reviews in *Pennsylvania History* make it apparent that the new scholarship is shedding light on many novel subjects. There seems to be no shortage of items to be reviewed.

Another trend is the recognition that history is not always neat and orderly. Scholarship on state history in the past several years has embraced this idea when it comes to environmental history, the histories of women and minorities, and labor and industrial history. There have been environmental catastrophes, mining accidents, and struggles for labor rights and racial and gender equality, and these stories have been embraced by Pennsylvania scholars. More apparent, too, is the scholarship on religious and spiritual diversity, ethnicity, and the role of place in history.

Yet another development has been to engage younger scholars and students in history organizations, chief among them the Pennsylvania Historical

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Association. For example, in 2011, for the first time, undergraduate research is being officially entertained at the PHA conference. Young scholars are also being encouraged to participate. Not that they were not welcome in the past but now there is a deliberate effort to include them. Other trends, as mentioned earlier, have been growth in twentieth-century scholarship and the influence of the Internet.

All of these topics present further opportunities for research as does the exploration of Pennsylvania as part of the Mid-Atlantic world. The 2009 PHA conference at Widener University opened opportunities to examine Pennsylvania as part of the Mid-Atlantic area. Approaching the state's history as part of Mid-Atlantic history places it within an important, broader context.

EDITORS: *Looking to the future generation again: what advice do you have for younger scholars who ask (or whose parents ask) what they can do with a degree in history?*
KEN AND BOB: One piece of advice, we think, is to follow your interests and let the rest work itself out. This is not intended to sound trite or flip, but rather to encourage young scholars to pursue the subjects they care about, follow their passions, and develop expertise. Once these things happen, others will become aware and opportunities will appear.

As we mentioned above, these are not easy times for public and academic historians. We believe things will improve in the future and there will always be a need for people to work in the profession whether it is in archives, museums, historic sites, historic preservation, or academe. Historic preservation is one of the growing areas in public history. We expect strong growth in public history with the retirement of the baby boomers who, for example, are already visiting sites, studying genealogy, and otherwise attempting to understand their past. There are also opportunities with cultural resource consulting firms that work with archaeology and history as required by State Historic Preservation Offices and the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

There will be other opportunities. We believe that many of them will have to be entrepreneurial in nature because of government-funding changes. We foresee strong possibilities for nonprofit (and possibly even for-profit) historical sites (some of them possibly former state facilities) where historians can play a vital role in planning, implementation, interpretation, grant writing, and administration. We believe that history is a critically important profession that still has several mountains to climb but we think the task will likely require more flexibility and innovativeness in the future.

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EDITORS: *Looking beyond the classroom, what challenges and opportunities do you see in the field of public history? What does the future hold for public historians in Pennsylvania?*

KEN AND BOB: Some of our comments above relate to this question. In a more general sense, we have found that chief among the challenges is to dispel the notion that important history *only* happens somewhere else: that important economic or social history, for example, could *only* have occurred in America's great urban centers or that important political history could have *only* taken place in Washington, D.C., or Harrisburg. Another challenge is to overcome the belief that history is history *only* if it concerns people, events, and places that have been deemed important by previous writers of history.

As historians we know that a much more nuanced approach is required. For public historians, the task and the opportunity is to find creative ways to involve the public in learning that important history has happened all around us even though it may not appear in textbooks. Oral history—where participants in less-than-noticed events can be engaged—is one way to research the often untold stories of people whose voices have not been part of the official record.

Two other important and more official ways to encourage the public are through the State Historical Marker and the National Register of Historic Places programs managed by the PHMC. Through these very public programs, local communities can gain ownership of history by recognizing the relevance of people, places, and events that have been overlooked. Information on both of these programs is available at www.phmc.state.pa.us.

Another challenge for public historians is to stimulate and respond to citizens' particular interests in a period, event, or topic. This is where special commemorations, themes, exhibits, and other venues can come into play. Perhaps the best recent example is the effort currently underway in Pennsylvania to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. Those interested can visit www.pacivilwar150.com to learn more about the programs across the Commonwealth that commemorate this period in American history.

Finally, it is no secret that public history has seen better times. We have mentioned that budget cuts and downsizings have been part of the landscape for several years now. It has, of course, been a difficult time and there are no easy answers. Yet, we have found that most people who enter the field of public history do so because of deep personal commitments. The important thing is for public historians to remain committed while weathering the economic and political storm. The current situation will not last forever. Professionals, after all, serve the profession and public historians are a most dedicated lot.

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EDITORS: *What suggestions do you have for engaging communities and individuals and encouraging them to preserve the rich cultural, ethnic, and architectural heritage of Pennsylvania and the Mid-Atlantic region?*

KEN AND BOB: One suggestion is for professional and nonprofessional historians to explore the opportunities to preserve and interpret the past that exists right in their own backyards and at the grassroots level.

For example, it has been gratifying to see that local historians (both professionals and nonprofessionals) and local organizations have been in the forefront of preserving and interpreting history. There are hundreds of local historical societies in Pennsylvania that sponsor events, commemorations, workshops, tours, preserve buildings, and employ other opportunities to engage the public. Each county in the Commonwealth has a historical society, for example, that does the same. Another important resource is the officially designated Heritage Parks in the Commonwealth (so designated by the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources) such as Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area in southwestern Pennsylvania and the Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Area in the eastern part of the state. Such organizations serve as *the* local catalyst for preserving and interpreting their area's history.

In just one regional example with which we are familiar, the anthracite area, there are many organizations working to preserve the past. Such organizations include county historical societies, the Huber Breaker Preservation Society in Nanticoke (working to preserve the northern field's last standing coal processing plant), the Anthracite Living History Group (working to preserve the Avondale Mine Disaster site in Plymouth Township), the Eckley Players (who have a wonderfully broad repertoire that includes plays on Mother Jones, the Molly Maguires, the Avondale tragedy, and other subjects), the Lackawanna Valley Heritage Area, as well as many local historical societies.

It is clear that preservation and interpretation activities and related public programs can benefit greatly from grassroots participation and the efforts of local organizations. Local folks care about local history and the professional historian often serves as an important resource. Indeed, the local efforts have supplemented the work of professional historians who are often among the speakers and resource persons for commemorations, special events, tours, and other public programs. Many of our professional colleagues are actively involved with the local history groups and we would encourage younger historians to join the effort.

With regard to architectural and community preservation, as mentioned earlier, it is important for individuals, professional and nonprofessional, to

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remember that there are tools available for such efforts. Chief among these tools, as mentioned earlier, is the National Register of Historic Places, which can play a central role in helping to preserve historic buildings and the historical character of communities. Many nominations that are presented to the PHMC every year are often derived from the efforts of local individuals and augmented by the work of professionals. Without such efforts we would not witness preservation of the historic character of so many communities across the Commonwealth.

EDITORS: *You have been involved in oral history projects and used first-person interviews in your work. To play devil's advocate—what can we learn from oral history beyond that one person's story?*

KEN AND BOB: We strongly believe that oral history can supplement written records in getting a fuller story on any subject. First-person accounts often enliven history, add meaning, and provide for a richer interpretation. Of course, oral histories of the type we conduct are not available for studies of the distant past, but even there historians have often employed first-person accounts in letters, diaries, and testimonies.

The methodological issue raised by the question implies that we are all individuals, each with our own personalized story. However, as social science has shown over the last 125 years or so, the individual really doesn't exist sociologically or anthropologically. We are all members of groups, communities, and institutions and, as such, our stories must be socially grounded. True, each story is particularistic in the sense that it belongs to a single person, yet each story can have meaning only within the contexts and bounds of the social.

It is also true that a person's memories of past events can get clouded (to make a long story short). To confront this methodological issue, we have always conducted as many interviews as possible and cross-referenced one interview with another, while comparing them all to written records of various types. Of course, we have benefited from studying topics with living subjects or at least people with secondhand knowledge of events. Like all resource materials, the questions of reliability and validity must also be kept in full mind.

EDITORS: *You've written a lot about NEPA. What does the history of NEPA tell us about America?*

KEN AND BOB: We believe that the anthracite region of northeastern Pennsylvania offers a quintessentially American colonial, industrial, and

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postindustrial story. Our concern has been with the latter two periods. The region's story is one of capital development, entrepreneurship, technological innovation, burgeoning markets, labor versus capital, immigration and ethnicity, government regulation, environmental degradation, and deindustrialization. The region has lost, or has nearly lost, coal, railroad, lace, silk, garment, cigar, shoe, and other industries. Yet there is still a manufacturing base and the localities continue to persevere despite hard economic times. The region is now the destination of new migrants from larger cities and immigrants from other countries, so the story continues on that front.

Of course, politics is always in season, and corruption and pollution have remained an unfortunate legacy of an exploitive industry. The region teaches us about regional dependency and how capital from large cities like New York and Philadelphia can shape a local area for decades beyond the demise of the industry that built it.

It is important to remember, too, that the anthracite region, like much of Pennsylvania, is Appalachia. Thus, as part of the Appalachian region, the ten anthracite counties can teach us about the extremes of the American economy and offer yet another story of the remarkable wealth generated from natural resource exploitation and the degrading poverty and environmental damage left in the wake of unfettered free-enterprise capitalism.

EDITORS: *Both of you have written extensively on labor history in Pennsylvania; how do you see this important field developing?*

KEN AND BOB: Pennsylvania has a very rich and diverse labor history. There is no shortage of labor stories. Simply considering the various unions rooted in the Commonwealth makes that clear. There are also the histories associated with the working class in the state's many industrial towns from Scranton to Johnstown to Homestead and many places in between. While, as we have mentioned, there has been a solid growth in labor history scholarship, there is also a good deal more work to do.

Our research has not focused on the history of unions although that has been a part of it. More precisely, we have examined the experiences of working people in, for example, the mining and garment industries. We have made conscious efforts, especially through oral history, to examine working people in their day-to-day lives, in job, family, and community, and in reaction to events such as the Knox Mine Disaster in 1959, or various strikes. We would argue that labor history cannot be fully examined if the stories of those who lived the events are not included. We believe that the experiences of working

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people are vitally important to writing labor history and we encourage efforts to gather first-person accounts to supplement the written documents and reports.

Deindustrialization is one topic that will need continuing investigation. While the Keystone State certainly still has an industrial base, it has undergone, and is undergoing, further deindustrialization. Numerous communities have been hard-hit by the loss of manufacturing plants and the resultant declines in population and income. Tens of thousands of steelworkers, coalminers, garment workers and others have lost their jobs in recent decades and the trend is continuing. In all likelihood, most of those jobs are not coming back. Important research questions remain and the topic is ripe for further studies. Among them: how have workers, unions, and communities responded to the changing labor market? What examples from the distant past can help us understand the workplace transformations that took place after 1980? How have the new economic realities affected in-plant labor relations?

Biographies

KENNETH C. WOLENSKY is a historian, author and speaker on Pennsylvania history. He has authored over twenty-five articles, books, monographs, and book reviews. He was employed for over twenty-five years in various

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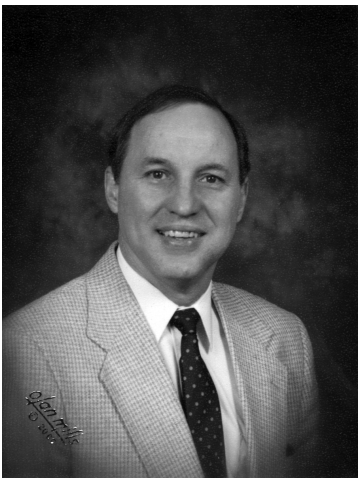
capacities by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, including fourteen as a historian at PHMC. He recently retired from state service. Ken serves as vice-president of the Pennsylvania Historical Association and is on the board of the Pennsylvania Labor History Society. He resides in Grantville.



ROBERT P. WOLENSKY serves as professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point, and as adjunct professor of history and sociology at King's College, Wilkes-Barre. In addition to the listings below, he has authored or coauthored *Better Than Ever: The Flood Recovery Task Force and the 1972 Tropical Storm Agnes Flood* (UW-SP Press, 1993); *Tragedy at Avondale: The Causes, Consequences, and Legacy of the Pennsylvania Anthracite Coal Industry's Most Deadly Mining Disaster, September 6, 1869* (Canal History and Technology Press, 2008); and *Anthracite Labor Wars: The Pennsylvania Coal Company, Ethnicity, and Organized Crime in the Wyoming-Lackawanna Coal Field of Northeastern Pennsylvania, 1903–1928* (Canal History and Technology Press, forthcoming). He resides in Stevens Point, Wisconsin.

Bob, Ken, and Nicole Wolensky-Civettini have coauthored *The Knox Mine Disaster: The Final Years of the Northern Anthracite and The Effort to Rebuild a Regional Economy* (PHMC, 1999); *Fighting for the Union Label: The Women's Garment Industry and the ILGWU in Pennsylvania* (Penn State, 2002), and *Voices of the Knox Mine Disaster: Stories, Remembrances, and Reflections on the Anthracite Coal Industry's Last Major Catastrophe, January 22, 1959* (PHMC, 2005).

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